



# SREB

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WORK

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## *Best Practices for Implementing HSTW and MMGW*

### Teachers Teaching Teachers: Creating a Community of Learners to Improve Instruction and Student Achievement

Effective school leaders use a variety of strategies — including creating opportunities for teachers to learn from each other — to encourage and support teachers in achieving greater excellence in the classroom. “Teachers teaching teachers” is a concept that can pay real dividends when it focuses on ways to engage and motivate students to perform at higher levels. Some of these low-cost methods that can be embedded into the school culture are:

#### Study groups

Schools establish study groups of teachers and administrators when there is a need for specific action in school improvement. **Rick Dawes** of **Randleman High School** in Randleman, North Carolina, says his school expects every teacher to participate in at least one study group and to implement the strategies learned in the group.

Study groups of up to six members can accomplish goals such as developing curriculums, planning lessons, sharing instructional methods, creating integrated learning opportunities, reviewing student work and examining assessments and achievement data. The emphasis is on improving instruction and student achievement.

Increasingly, schools are using study groups to look at student work to decide if it is basic, proficient or advanced and to suggest ways to increase the rigor of classroom and homework assignments. **Ruth Mitchell** of **The Education Trust** developed a process known as “standards in practice” for aligning teacher assignments to grade-level standards. The process includes the development of scoring guides or rubrics.

Two Maryland schools used the study group approach to look at middle grades students’ written work to decide whether the level of writing would be sufficient for high school success. The group was composed of an administrator and three teachers representing one high school and one middle school. Members met one Saturday per month throughout the school year.

“Our goal was to start a conversation between middle grades teachers and the high school faculty on how to improve students’ writing skills,” said **Frank Passaro** of **Calvert Hall High School** in Towson, Maryland. The key questions were: “Are the written pieces the quality we would expect from eighth-graders?” and “How can we help these students and all other students write at the level we would expect?”

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This newsletter of “best practices” in implementing *High Schools That Work* and *Making Middle Grades Work* is based on presentations related to Conference Sub-objectives 2c-2f (Conditions That Support Teachers) from the 19th Annual *HSTW* Staff Development Conference. The conference was held July 13-16, 2005, at the Gaylord Opryland Resort and Conference Center in Nashville, Tennessee. For more information on Conference Objectives and Sub-objectives, go to [www.sreb.org](http://www.sreb.org).

The group used the “tuning protocol” method of evaluative feedback developed by Joseph McDonald and David Allen for the **Annenberg Institute for School Reform**. A tuning protocol includes a series of steps to examine student work and to determine what constitutes good work. The steps are: an introduction to the task at hand, a presentation of student work by a teacher, clarifying questions from members of the group, individual writing by group members as the basis for their recommendations, a group discussion, the presenter’s reflection on the group’s input, and a debriefing by the participants.

The staff development aspect continues when the presenting teacher is asked to teach the process to his or her department or to the entire faculty, or to develop a plan that addresses student writing and bring it back to the study group.

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## Critical friends groups

Teachers in these groups meet together one to two hours monthly for the purpose of improving their teaching skills through collaborative learning. They have a leader or “coach” who has been trained to help the teachers get the most out of their sessions. (The National School Reform Faculty program sponsors training for CFG coaches.)

“Critical friends are teachers who volunteer to sit down together to review student work,” explains **Jeanne Constantino**, a teacher at **The Rayen School** in Youngstown, Ohio. “We bring students’ work to our meetings and use our protocols and norms to help each other improve on the work we have given students. We help each other solve any dilemmas or issues that we might have.”

The rules for conducting a Critical Friends Group are straightforward: Start and end on time; honor everyone’s opinion; stay on task; be professional; keep the discussions confidential; respect and support one another; and include feedback and follow-up in each meeting.

*(Contact Jeanne Constantino at [jconst2011@aol.com](mailto:jconst2011@aol.com).)*

## Demonstration classrooms

Teachers who have become adept in using one or more classroom teaching and learning strategies may want to become “demonstration teachers” to help their colleagues learn to use these techniques. The research-based strategies modeled by the demonstration teachers may include: cooperative learning, project-based learning, problem solving, Socratic seminars, teaching successfully in a block schedule, reading and writing for learning, conflict analysis, assessments that require constructed responses and a host of other strategies.

These teachers agree to participate in professional development on a certain instructional technique, produce a brochure or flier to describe the strategy or strategies they will be modeling, keep a reflective journal about their experiences and provide professional development to other staff members. They agree to demonstrate their “pet” strategies at least three times during the school year for teachers who visit their classrooms on specified days.

**Melanie Kesler**, a social studies teacher at **Randleman High School** in Randleman, North Carolina, said, “It gives teachers an expert at the school to help other teachers.” She notes the benefits to the demonstration teachers as well as to the observers. “Being a demonstration teacher forces you to take something you’re excited about and become more comfortable using it in your own classroom,” she said.

Prospective demonstration teachers submit applications to their principals in which they promise to provide additional professional development to teachers during professional development time, after school, during early release or at other appropriate times. The journals kept by demonstration teachers include lesson plans that are given to teachers in advance of the experience as well as descriptions of what worked, what did not work, things to do differently next time, reactions of the observing teachers and feedback from the observers.

Teachers at **R.B. Stall High School** in North Charleston, South Carolina, receive a weekly e-mail message that creates excitement about what is happening in demonstration classrooms: an Algebra I teacher is incorporating technology into mathematics; an English I teacher is involving students actively in *Romeo and Juliet*; a global studies teacher is asking students to write news articles about coal mining and early space exploration after viewing the movie *October Sky*.

**Claudia Schooler** of **Indianola High School** in Indianola, Iowa, stressed the importance of follow-up to see if teachers are using the new strategies. She also reminded teachers that their administrators could free up time for demonstration class visits. “Being a demonstration teacher holds me accountable for good teaching and enables me to share what I know,” she said.

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## Peer coaching

Schools with high turnover rates among teachers will be interested in peer coaching to motivate and help teachers learn techniques that contribute to increased satisfaction and effectiveness in the classroom. The only requirement for participation is a desire to improve professional expertise and to form alliances with other faculty members. Depending on the school, peer coaching may be known as collegial coaching or cognitive coaching.

**Therese Reddekopp**, principal at **Northgate High School** in Newnan, Georgia, said teachers who volunteer and are chosen to become coaches receive six hours of training. Other teachers fill out forms asking for in-depth information on particular instructional topics. An administrator matches each teacher to a coach.

The process includes three phases: a pre-conference before the coaching session, the actual coaching and a post-conference. In the pre-conference session, the teacher tells the coach the objectives of the upcoming lesson, what data the coach needs to gather to enhance the experience for the teacher, and specific things that the teacher hopes to receive as a result of the experience. The post-conference is used for reviewing what took place in the classroom. The purpose of peer coaching is to instruct, not to judge; the emphasis is on suggestions for putting more content and student engagement into a lesson.

*(Contact Therese Reddekopp at [therese.reddekopp@cowetaschools.org](mailto:therese.reddekopp@cowetaschools.org).)*

## Peer observations

Pairs of teachers from different grade levels and different subject areas benefit from this strategy, which serves to increase instructional quality, collaboration and a sense of “community.” Voluntary participation is the key. Each member of an observation pair agrees to visit the other teacher’s classroom at least one time. The two teachers establish the purpose of an observation in advance and meet afterward to discuss how to improve teaching and learning.

“Groups of three or four may also agree to conduct peer observations,” said **Mark Dewalt**, director of graduate studies at **Winthrop University** in Rock Hill, South Carolina. “If so, the entire group should meet to discuss the positive aspects of what they observed.”

The types of information that peer observers might want to collect include the following: verbal and non-verbal interactions between the teacher and his or her students; whether students are keeping on task; questioning techniques being used to involve students; motivational techniques; and guided and individual practice.

*(Contact Mark Dewalt at [dewaltm@winthrop.edu](mailto:dewaltm@winthrop.edu).)*

## Mentor programs for new teachers

Everyone who is new to teaching or new to the district is required to participate in the mentor program at **Tri-County Regional Vocational Technical High School** in Franklin, Massachusetts. The program involves veteran teachers as mentors to nurture and support newcomers as they gain confidence to become “extraordinary” teachers.

The principal and a coordinating team worked together to develop the mentor program, which consists of a three-day summer orientation, one-on-one mentoring during the school year and mandatory monthly seminars. The seminars focus on weighty matters such as classroom management, lesson plans and state standards. The mentoring topics range from guidance department practices to “nuts and bolts” information on schedules and equipment.

A new teacher observes his or her mentor in the classroom three times and opens his or her own classroom to the mentor five times during the school year. After each visit, the new teacher and the mentor meet together to follow up on the instruction. Mentors offer suggestions and maintain confidentiality. They do not evaluate the teachers they are mentoring or report negative findings to the principal.

*(Contact Mary O'Connor, English teacher, at Tri-County Regional Vocational Technical High School at [oconnor@tri-county.te](mailto:oconnor@tri-county.te).)*

## Distance learning

Rapid technological advances are making it possible for teachers to go online to obtain and share information that will improve their performance in the classroom. In fact, the evidence is pointing to online courses as the fastest growing form of teacher training in the nation.

Two Web-based courses from SREB will help teachers raise students' literacy and numeracy skills:

- The Reading and Writing for Learning (RW4L) online literacy course prepares middle grades and high school teachers to use reading and writing for learning strategies in their content areas. The course consists of nine online modules with many interactive features such as e-mail, online bulletin boards and "chat" rooms. *(For more information, phone 404-879-5578 or e-mail [ProfDevPrograms@sreb.org](mailto:ProfDevPrograms@sreb.org).)*
- The Middle Grades Mathematics (MGM) series is designed to increase the mathematics content and instructional skills of current middle grades mathematics teachers as well as individuals who want to become certified or approved to teach middle grades mathematics. The series consists of seven courses developed by three postsecondary institutions. *(Details are available at [www.electroniccampus.org/TeacherCenter/ExperiencedTeacher/MGM/course\\_information.asp](http://www.electroniccampus.org/TeacherCenter/ExperiencedTeacher/MGM/course_information.asp).)*

**EdTech Leaders Online** is a professional development program to help school districts, state departments of education, regional service providers and other educational organizations incorporate technology into their educational programs. The national initiative involves school-based teams in 17 states. Each team completes a semester-length online course in how to facilitate online workshops for their colleagues on integrating technology into the curriculum. The teams are expected to connect the online learning with ongoing, face-to-face professional development activities. "We have learned that vibrant, interactive communities of educators can be built online and have significant effects on classroom teacher practice," noted **Barbara Treacy**, senior project director for EdTech Leaders Online at the Education Development Center Inc. in Massachusetts.

**Blogging** is a new high-tech trend that allows teachers to voice their opinions electronically. Short for "weblog," a blog is a Web page that serves as a personal journal where someone can post information and participate in Web-based discussions. Teachers can "talk" about their personal teaching experiences, their ideas about teaching in general or their favorite teaching techniques.

**Anne Davis**, information systems training specialist in instructional technology at **Georgia State University** in Atlanta, Georgia, said, "Blogs are used by lots of educators. They are quick and easy and usually free." She suggests [blogger.com/start](http://blogger.com/start) as a good place to begin. "It has templates that will make it possible for you to be up and running in five minutes," she said.

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